

THE RHETORIC OF RAPE-REVENGE FILMS:  
ANALYZING VIOLENT FEMALE PORTRAYALS IN MEDIA FROM A  
NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF STANDPOINT FEMINISM

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, three children, mother, father, three younger brothers, and best friend Mysty. But most of all, to God, who I know I would not have had the grace to make it this far without. I thank my husband for the inspiration he gave me to be true to myself. My three children I give thanks to for giving me a reason to keep going when I just wanted to give up. I am also immensely grateful to my mom for instilling values in me that helped to make the concepts taught in academia much easier to understand. To my dad, I give you thanks for giving me a shoulder to cry on. Thank you to my three younger brothers for being my competition. To Mysty, I dedicate this thesis to you for the curiosity and inspiration you ignited within me in the first place. And finally, God, thank you for being my rock and my salvation.

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Rachel Jean Turner

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In this study, narrative analysis, informed by the perspective of standpoint feminism, is applied to movies featuring female protagonists throughout the past five decades of the “rape and revenge” genre of filmmaking to understand the extent to which probability and fidelity function in these five films to create empathy for the victims of sexual violence. Narrative criticism is used to assess motives behind stories told in media texts, while standpoint feminism illuminates epistemological implications to cultivate intersectional viewpoints. This study provides a narrative analysis through standpoint feminism of five films that each consider female portrayals of violence as a central part of its plot. Each film represents their respective time frames over the past five decades, falls under the criteria of what constitutes a “rape and revenge” film, have been viewed overall by mainstream audiences as films that are relatively well known, and portrays women as protagonists in the plot lines. Using the theoretical insights of narrative criticism, this study investigates the common themes observed in the films that fit these specific criteria to illuminate violent female portrayals in film and identify the extent to which probability and fidelity function in these five films to create empathy for the victims of sexual violence. Standpoint feminism provides the framework to reveal the broader cultural implications of violent rhetoric in gendered media portrayals of films from the past five decades featuring female protagonists.

Catherine A. Dobris, Ph.D., Chair

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## CHAPTER ONE:

### INTRODUCTION

The roles represented by actresses in mainstream media portrayals of women have historically been depictions that show females in a position of vulnerability and subservience. For example, Bleakley, Jamieson, and Romer observe that although women are portrayed in media less often than men, when they are portrayed, they are more likely to be depicted in sexual acts and, increasingly, scenes of gendered violence (Bleakley, Jamieson, & Romer, 2012). Overall, female representations in mainstream media have been reduced to continual exposure of violent themes where women are subjected to brutal scenes of being beaten, raped, and murdered, which feminist theorist Judith Butler illuminates in her discussion of objectivity of female bodies in media through means of violence (Butler, 1993). However, the rape and revenge genre of filmmaking has used the all-too-common trope of injustice against women throughout the past five decades using female narratives that are driven by the desire to seek justice. Popular film critic, Roger Ebert, has scrutinized the notorious 1978 rape and revenge film, *I Spit on Your Grave*, arguing that this subgenre of exploitation film persists in using stories of female vulnerability as another excuse to indulge in “nihilistic gore” (Ebert, 1980).

Additionally, feminist media scholar Amanda Hess offers further examination of the violent genre in *Rape, Revenge and How We Watch*, concerned that the exploitation of what may be initially construed as female empowerment may instead be misused tenets of mainstream feminism in media storytelling (Hess, Rape, Revenge And How We Watch, 2017). Hess posits that, “For decades, films have staged rapes of women, then directed their attention to some man's story instead. We're just beginning to see what it



looks like when the camera doesn't turn away.” Subversive character arcs in contemporary media portrayals of women such as those in the films *It Follows*, *Kill Bill 1 & 2*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and *Wonder Woman*, serve as prime examples of narratives that feminist scholars contend help to illuminate the inner journeys of women’s experiences over the course of a story, and further posit that these alternative female portrayals help restore agency to female representations in media in such a way that does not exploit the complex and lasting effects of gendered violence that various feminist scholars argue occur in the rape and revenge genre of films. Moreover, various feminist media scholars posit that of the many female narratives that have appealed to audiences historically, these films embody multiple female character arcs that incorporate intersectional issues of race, class, culture, religion, and disability to further challenge perceptions of gender. It is also suggested that though the women in these stories portray the common female narrative of being weak, vulnerable, and disenfranchised, the transformations revealed in these stories provide the depth of insight necessary to understand the extent to which probability and fidelity function in these five films to create empathy for the victims of sexual violence.

In this study, an analysis has been conducted to understand how women and violence are portrayed in scholarly texts using narrative analysis from the lens of standpoint feminism to address the gendered, socioeconomic and political factors inherent to the themes within these films. As such, narrative criticism focuses on the stories a narrator tells to understand how they help us make meaning out of our daily human experiences through the illumination of character motivations and critiquing these films from the lens of standpoint feminism provides a component that is useful in

deconstructing patriarchal assumptions that have been deeply embedded in media portrayals of violent female rhetoric.

*Representations of Mainstream Feminism in Contemporary Media*

Though there is extensive research which focuses on portrayals of women in contemporary film, Sendra-Cook contends that many contemporary films attract viewers by misusing the tenets of feminism, stating that the product of feminist movements “is a society that seems to support feminist tenets while simultaneously oppressing women” (Sendra-Cook, 2009). The lack of intersectional analysis in mainstream feminism has a long history of contributing to the preservation of White supremacy in silencing and abusing marginalized experiences of oppression. A narrative analysis from a standpoint feminist perspective of violent female portrayals also offer insight into how popular cultural texts such as film reviews impact audience viewpoints regarding the extent to which probability and fidelity function in these five films to create empathy for the victims of sexual violence.

More specifically, an analysis on women’s roles and behaviors in contemporary media focus on portrayals of midlife women’s sexuality in 13 recent U.S. narrative films. Author of *Changing the Scripts: Midlife Women’s Sexuality in Contemporary U.S. Film*, Rose Weitz, employs a content analysis on these films which suggest that film portrayals of midlife women’s sexuality are comparatively subdued, illuminating that the most positive portrayals were noted in comedies (Weitz, 2010). Weitz points out that midlife women’s bodies were typically depicted as humorous vehicles rather than objects of desire, the “female gaze” directed towards the male body was presented as a comedic trope, and that midlife women’s sexuality is only representative of prototypes that fit the

“slim, white, middle-class” female template. The cultivation of committed romantic relationships with “age-appropriate” partners were also observed in Weitz’ analysis where she concludes that “midlife women should have sexual desires, should act on those desires, should experience sexual pleasure, and should not sacrifice their sexual needs for a man’s approval.” Weitz’ reading provides a framework for understanding how the depiction of elder women in film has significantly impacted representations of agency that are portrayed for females regarding ageism.

Tina Pippin similarly explores the roles of women in contemporary film in *Warrior Women of the Apocalypse: The Role of the Female in Some Apocalyptic Films*, observing that women portrayed as “good”, even when pitted against women portrayed as “evil”, persist in following the theme of female dependency in media portrayals (Pippin, 2006). Central to the plot of apocalyptic films is confrontation with and/or reconciliation of the inevitable end of the world, which Pippin argues most of these films uphold in casting females as subordinate, with traditional roles as romantic partners, even if they do possess the capacity to participate in the resolve of dystopian narratives. She also articulates that “in utopia or dystopia women are usually left to sexual and reproductive roles, and women who try to rise above their status are portrayed as evil or are neutralized.” As such, Pippin’s analysis indicates that stereotypes of women in these films compared with female depictions in children's fairy tales, especially for those women who try to exercise their power, demonstrate that in acts of storytelling there are opportunities for representations of female empowerment that are compatible with schools of intersectional feminist thought.

Media Studies scholar Jacinda Read, offers that “popular culture has become one of the primary realms in which feminism is now ‘lived’ and experienced by the majority of women” according to her analysis of feminist movements of the 1990’s (Read, 2000). In her text, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, the ways in which “normative femininities” are “dramatized and articulated” in rape-revenge film are explored, in addition to how “gaps and contradictions” are cultivated “between the ‘feminine’ (victim) and ‘feminist’ (avenger)” as well as “between the popular and the political.” Read’s analyses of various films of the rape-revenge genre provide a framework for understanding violent female narratives in their ability to tell stories that only seek to reposition women to the confines of the domestic private sphere, where they can once again focus on the career tropes of motherhood, marriage, and romance that are often illustrated as common backstories for said rape-revenge heroines.

Defined as an intersectional expansion to the idea of patriarchy that goes beyond the constructs of gender, the term kyriarchy was coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in her 1992 text, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Fiorenza, 1993). Fiorenza employed the term to describe the establishment of related social systems that encompass domination, oppression, and submission in hierarchies of intersectional considerations which include sexism, racism, speciesism, homophobia, classism, economic injustice, colonialism, militarism, ethnocentrism, and anthropocentrism in their ability to oppress an individual in some instances while privileging them in others. Kyriarchy is maintained through unrecognizable patterns of oppression that preserve the status quo by means of subservient positions that reinforce educational, social, violent, and malestream logic of class, race, gender, and people. Media representations of violent

female portrayals serve in continuing this unrecognizable pattern that depict women as weak, overemotional, lacking sexual desire, irrational, and superficial, resulting in enforced stereotypes that construct norms of social, political, and economic superiority.

The portrayal of women in contemporary film based on scholarly literature surrounding the lack of intersectional perspectives reveals that themes of kyriarchy continue to prevail in current media portrayals which potentially represent contemporary mainstream feminism. Depictions of elderly women, assumptions of female morality, and normalization of gender roles in occupation demonstrate the implications of kyriarchy on language, epistemology, and valuation of ideas that reflect the divide that exists between mainstream and marginalized understandings of gendered violence and oppression. The illumination of this cultural divide presents a framework for understanding how gendered experiences of oppression, such as problematic definitions of violence, further contribute to rhetorical situations that fail to deconstruct intersectional issues deeply inherent in media depictions of contemporary mainstream feminism regarding violent female portrayals.

This research is intended to contribute to the discourse surrounding violent female portrayals, in which a narrative analysis from the lens of standpoint feminism has been conducted to the genre of rape and revenge films from the last five decades to understand the extent to which probability and fidelity function in these five films to create empathy for the victims of sexual violence. This first chapter introduced the present study, examining portrayals of women in contemporary film that potentially represent mainstream tenets of feminism. In the second chapter, a review of the pertinent literature consists of three sections: The first section explores interpretations of women in

contemporary film that theoretically represent intersectional feminism, the second section addresses women and problematic definitions of violence, and the third section concludes the literature review with an exploration of connections between and among feminism, women and violence. In the third chapter, the methodology and a description of the artifacts is provided. In chapter four, analysis, using the narrative paradigm and the framework of standpoint feminism to identify fundamental concepts in each of the five films, is presented, along with relevant findings. Finally, chapter five ends with a discussion that provides insights this analysis illuminates, as well as limitations to the research, regarding violent female portrayals in the rape-revenge genre of cinema.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Understanding problematic definitions of violence as well as the rhetoric of women, feminism, and violence from a gendered perspective is useful for analyzing the extent to which probability and fidelity function in these five films to create empathy for the victims of sexual violence. Writer and film critic Anne Bilson discusses the value of “redefining the tropes of the genre” of rape-revenge film through the replacement of the male gaze with the female one as a means of subverting the traditional format that the cinematography of rape-revenge has been accused of exploiting historically (Billson, 2018). In doing so, representations of violent female portrayals challenge rhetorical constructions of mainstream feminism that misuse tenets of mainstream feminism in upholding ideologies of kyriarchy and prevail in perpetuating domination, oppression, and submission rather than female empowerment. As such, the identification of kyriarchal values inherently present in gendered violent media portrayals illuminates the impact of imperialist White capitalist patriarchy ideology in perpetuating problematic definitions of violence for the central characters of the films chosen for this analysis. This chapter begins with an exploration of scholarly texts that examines media representations of intersectional feminism. Next, an analysis of scholarly literature about problematic definitions of violence is explored. Finally, literature surrounding the rhetoric of feminism, women, and violence is be examined.

#### *Media Representations of Intersectional Feminism*

Issues of intersectionality regarding gender roles provide a framework for analyzing how kyriarchy is cultivated in contemporary media portrayals that potentially

represent mainstream feminism. In *The Page and the Screen: The Subversive Message of World War II-Era Hollywood Films Adapted from Contemporary Novels by and About Women*, author Joanne McGurk considers subversive possibilities of World War II-era films adapted from contemporary novels featuring female characters in war-related roles (McGurk, 2014). McGurk posits that the consideration of novels and films together potentially permits audiences to see them as vehicles that cultivate evolving acceptance of unconventional depictions regarding women's roles and behaviors. In her article, she suggests that becoming familiar with film and literary history in this way has “the power to offer the current post-9/11 generation a way out of the belligerence, paranoia, and xenophobia that characterize visions of the world evident in such productions as the 2011 Showtime television series *Homeland* or director Christopher Nolan’s 2012 feature film, *The Dark Knight Rises*.” According to McGurk, four key social adaptations surrounding women’s behaviors and roles during the war years include: seizure of public ground, (especially in employment and the armed services), public notice of the war work done by women, (both in production as well as the military), self-adaptation of physical appearance on the part of women (women wearing men’s trousers and other stereotypically masculine accessories of the given time period), and appropriation of sexual expression where women are portrayed engaging in sexual behaviors. McGurk claims that these nontraditional depictions of women made from contemporary novels and first-person nonfiction accounts in conjunction with motion picture products combine to potentially give voice and vision to the accelerating changes in women’s behavior and roles. McGurk’s suggestive consideration invokes a foundational basis for understanding how females in contemporary film might work to influence tenets of intersectional



feminism while advocating for liberation of women's roles and behaviors from traditional norms that have historically oppressed them.

Similarly, other scholars share McGurks' vision of accelerating change through nontraditional representations of women's behavior and roles in media texts. In *Challenging the Boundaries of Cinema's Rape-Revenge Genre in Katalin Varga and Twilight Portrait*, Claire Henry offers reinterpretations through two characters' narratives that challenge the emotionally gripping experience of the "rape and revenge film" genre which contrasts typical responses of "revenge and restorative justice while also pointing to the radical potential of the contemporary genre" (Henry, 2013). The author critiques the rape and revenge genre of storytelling, stating that this shift in film category challenges generic expectations and conventions to achieve an ethical positioning that enables audiences to reassess the morals and usefulness of revenge. Her analysis offers a framework for understanding the significant impact mass mediated texts have in shaping ideals that many films misuse regarding tenets of contemporary mainstream feminism. Influenced by these forces, Henry's exploration of characters' ethical interrogations regarding the rape-revenge genre contends that Varga and Portrait test the genre's own boundaries, its own assumptions, and the visceral pleasures it has traditionally offered. Henry suggests that instead, the genre's characteristic invocation of "shame, rage and disgust" are refabricated to construct alternate viewpoints through the means of political and ethical appeals.

In *Embodying Change: Cinematic Representations of Indigenous Women's Bodies, A Cross-Cultural Comparison*, Jennifer Gauthier explores the fetishization of Indigenous women as "exotic, objectified, and hypersexualized throughout the history of

cinema” (Gauthier, 2015). In doing so, the author states that Indigenous film-makers take the camera into their own hands, challenging these representations and ultimately disrupting existing hierarchies of power. Gauthier examines the work of two Indigenous women film-makers, Tracey Moffatt (Aboriginal Australian) and Tracey Deer (Mohawk), whose films speak back to historical images of Native women. Gauthier’s argument demonstrates that rather than being reduced to exotic objects of the man’s gaze, Indigenous women are instead portrayed in these films as powerful agents of their own lives and identities. Through this perspective, it provides a framework for understanding how popular discourse produced by cultural institutions reshapes conventional norms of women’s assumed roles and behaviors to instead reflect lived realities of multifaceted identities consonant with principles of intersectional feminism.

#### *Women and Problematic Definitions of Violence*

In order to effectively analyze violent female rhetoric, it is first important to establish an operating definition of what may be considered “violent” from an intersectional perspective. A simple Google search of the term likely navigates one to the *World Health Organization’s* definition, which describes violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation" (Organization, 2017). The lack of definitive inclusivity for the term creates problematic outcomes that result in the attempt to universally define what violence is, as those that have been denied justice for violence committed attest to in describing their experiences of erasure, silence, and invisibility when their encounters of injustice are disclosed for marginalized cultures.

Author Katherine van Wormer acknowledges the necessity of incorporating subjective viewpoints in the definition of violence to expand on the contextual meaning of the term in *Restorative Justice as Social Justice for Victims of Gendered Violence: A Standpoint Feminist Perspective* (van Wormer, 2009). Her article outlines the process of restorative justice and examines its relevance to women who have suffered physical and sexual abuse. She discusses the process of restorative justice, which begins first with the justice system, exploring its origins in “adversarial, offender-oriented practices of obtaining justice” and recommends the present legal system requires a renovation of punitive practices in courtrooms for victims of gendered violence. These strategies of restorative justice provide a framework for understanding how the focus on solution rather than problem-based approaches seek to legitimize experiences of marginalization, and place emphasis on therapeutic methods of reconciliation.

Similarly, in *How Well Does the World Health Organization Definition of Domestic Violence Work for India?*, Kalokhe, Potdar, Stephenson, Dunkle, Paranjape, and Sahay also argue for the significance of subjective definitions and experiences of violence to be further expanded upon to better understand how not only individual beings participate in the rhetoric of violence, but also explore how structures operate to benefit from the ambiguity that rhetorical devices disseminate in regard to the abuse of power, regardless of motivational intents and purposes (Kalokhe, et al., 2015). The authors demonstrate the multiple forms of power abuse that occur in subjective accounts and the extent to which they manifest in ways that dismiss the damaging implications violence may contextually produce. The observations in this analysis illustrate how deep-rooted historical sexist ideologies inform perceptions of violence through the lens of

intersectionality and explain how social inequities manifest in perpetuating systemic gendered violence in legal institutions.

Feminist legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon also illustrates the contradictory role that injustice plays when frameworks of legality attempt to validate meaning for what is elected as an agreeable form of violence, such as rape, from hegemonic standpoints of reasoning, stating that definitions of violence have been established historically by privileged male standards in *Towards a Feminist Theory of State* (MacKinnon, 1989). MacKinnon states that the lack of definitive inclusivity creates problematic outcomes that result in the universalizing attempt to define what violence is, as those that have been denied justice for violence committed describe in their experiences of erasure, silence, and invisibility when their encounters of injustice are disclosed. Due to the extent that injustice continues to occur for experiences of gendered violence through singular definitions of violence from a legal standpoint, MacKinnon works to deconstruct common terms used in court to describe specific instances of gendered violence, such as ‘penetration’, to argue that patriarchal notions of male ownership over female bodies has significant impact on who decides ultimately what are deemed acts of both violation and violence. According to MacKinnon, sexual violation and perspectives of violence are only constructed as such based on male assumptions of what is considered of value in their assessment of the female body. The author argues that since vaginal penetration directly affects male encounters with females once rape occurs, that other accounts of violation from a female constructed standpoint do not elicit the same measures of urgency for justice. These observations provide the framework for understanding how the

lived realities of those victimized by gendered violence are delegitimized in legal systems due to patriarchal values surrounding perceptions of female-bodied ownership.

In *Rape Redefined*, another article authored by MacKinnon, she argues that due to the viewpoints with which dominant groups decide what has been defined as rape, the damaging rhetoric perpetuated because of this socially constructed definition excludes subjective accounts of what is legally constituted as sexual violation, allowing for the ambiguity of such definitions to manifest within the judicial system (MacKinnon, 2016). MacKinnon argues that legal definitions of this form of gendered violence do not address the issues of violation and violence that are the lived reality for victims of sexual assault. She contends that these courtroom definitions represent a problematic factor for women, where universalization of the term rape becomes incompatible to subjective viewpoints of the term. In coming to define violence, MacKinnon explores discussions surrounding objective and subjective definitions of the term which become problematic in much of the same way that coming to define even more particular forms of violence, such as rape does. These observations provide the framework for understanding how sufferers of gendered violence, especially in correlation to acts of violation such as rape, are either judged as victims or offenders depending on contextual factors surrounding situations of assault and furthermore, perpetuate damaging implications of victim blaming inherent in rape culture. MacKinnon argues that current laws still cultivate victim blaming in courtrooms regarding situations of gendered violence and that subjective definitions of sexual assault must be advocated for to endorse the gender equality that is necessary for female justice in legal systems.

Similarly, Marianne Jørgensen examines the relationship between issues of gendered violence and the lack of justice for subjective viewpoints of the marginalized. In her article *The Terms of Debate: The Negotiation of the Legitimacy of a Marginalised Perspective*, she discusses the growing body of knowledge within social sciences from perspectives of marginalized viewpoints, and how male-dominated, Eurocentric hegemonic perspectives have the tendency to exclude these perspectives (Jørgensen, 2010). Jørgensen reviews the empirical material of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, which critiques Western science and calls for more inclusive methods of research. Jørgensen suggests that Sandra Harding's version of standpoint feminist theory explores and presents a reconsideration of what is known as a "classical understanding" of culture in place of a postmodernist approach. Understanding how marginalized accounts of women and violence are impacted provide a valuable context for considering the application of standpoint feminism to the epistemology and socialization of gendered violence.

In the article *In a Different World: The Ethic of Care and Pragmatic Contradictions in Feminist Research in a Women's Prison*, feminist researchers Novek and Sanford also examine the implications of gendered violence from marginalized perspectives as they take into consideration feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan's ethic of care concepts from the viewpoints of women's experiences as prisoners (Novek & Sanford, 2004). The authors' findings challenge epistemological views and the response of behaviors and actions that stem from the contextual setting of a women's prison, in which they consider intersectional issues of race, class, culture, age, and religion. Because of the authors' encounters with teaching journalism classes at a state prison for

women, they found the social construct of the prison to be a centripetal force in disrupting what has come to be known about Gilligan's ethic of care as situations occurred that called for relational maintenance and mutual exchange. Therefore, the application of exploring discourse that challenges Gilligan's care ethic concept from an intersectional standpoint illuminates the contradictory nature of accounts that represent the ways in which privilege, and the lack thereof, inform situational contexts of gendered violence depending on circumstantial factors such as race, class, culture, age, and religion.

A review of the literature on problematic definitions of gendered violence reveals that accounts of marginalized experiences have been silenced and erased. From the attempts to universally define gendered violence, to the legal implications of injustice that occur when experiences of gendered violence are expressed from a marginalized perspective, courtrooms and social scientific research alike demonstrate that the epistemology of privilege persists in preventing gender equality from being addressed through the lens of intersectionality. The illumination of the continual invisibility of marginalized viewpoints demonstrates how the perpetuation of kyriarchy tactically evades values of female-bodied-ownership, victim-blaming and rape culture in legal institutions, erasure of cultural oppression through traditional frameworks of social science, and the omission of intersectional standpoints regarding gendered values of relational development. The extent to which contemporary mainstream feminism upholds lack of consideration for issues of intersectionality provides the framework for understanding how problematic definitions of gendered violence exclude marginalized

perspectives from participating in the public sphere about subjective experiences of oppression.

Accordingly, each of the articles examined in this literature review thus far have examined media representations of intersectional feminism and problematic definitions of gendered violence. These analyses on intersectional feminist representation in media texts and problematic definitions of gendered violence indicate the rhetoric of contemporary mainstream feminism is limited by traditional constructs of imperialist White capitalist heteropatriarchal philosophy (kyriarchy). Even though contemporary films have attempted to incorporate tenets of feminism, an examination of women in recent media portrayals that potentially represent mainstream feminism signify the traditional role of White ideology that persists in oppressing expressions of marginalized experiences, and furthermore, reveal the epistemological implications of excluding the lens intersectional viewpoints when cultivating contextual definitions of gendered violence. Therefore, the literature review of both potential representations in media of intersectional feminism and problematic definitions of gendered violence demonstrate that the study of violent female portrayals is significant in understanding the extent to which probability and fidelity can create empathy for the victims of sexual violence in the films chosen for this analysis.

### *The Rhetoric of Feminism, Women, and Violence*

Illustrations of contemporary feminism in violent female rhetoric offers potential for a deeper understanding of the ways in which empathy may theoretically be constructed for victims of sexual abuse. While it has been argued by audiences, critics, and scholars alike that violent female rhetoric employs messages of female



empowerment, it is important to analyze the impact of intersectional feminism on audiences in the effort to dissect the ways in which tenets of feminism have been misused in violent female rhetoric and the implications of cultivating such beliefs. To better understand the historical implications of violent female rhetoric on mainstream views of intersectional feminism, it is essential to first explore current feminist analyses of violent female portrayals in media.

In *Lessons from Westeros: Gender and Power in Game of Thrones*, Clapton and Shepherd discuss how gender is represented in media in relation to political power and how violent female portrayals in television series such as *Game of Thrones* formulate dichotomized viewpoints of such epistemology (Clapton & Shepherd, 2017). The authors suggest that the HBO television series *Game of Thrones*, in addition to other cultural texts, diverge these ways of knowing and challenge both the apparatuses that divide up but also marginalize cultural viewpoints. Because these issues are central to contemporary feminist thought, exploration and evaluation of how cultural experiences formulate views about various responses to power are valuable for understanding the ways in which socialization of aggressive and violent responses is elicited. From the perspectives of Clapton and Shepherd, the ways in which the public sphere is impacted depending on gender representation surrounding political topics also relate to audience reception of marginalized experiences that are addressed in gendered media representations. Their study of violent female rhetoric is valuable for understanding the extent to which, if any, gendered representations of marginalized experiences reflect contemporary schools of mainstream feminist viewpoints.

Similarly, Ferreday employs a feminist critique of the television series as well in *Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom*, where the author examines feminist responses to a particularly notorious rape scene from the *Game of Thrones* television series with consideration to the wider context regarding cultural debates surrounding rape culture and media representations of sexual violence (Ferreday, 2015). The author researches how dominant rape culture discourses are both reproduced and challenged in fan communities and argues that while these fan narratives may “reproduce discourses of masculinity that contribute to rape culture”, they can also potentially create opportunities for discourse that encourages those silenced by experiences of trauma to speak out. Ferreday’s feminist analysis of audience reactions to the rhetoric of female violence provides opportunity for the exploration of understanding the extent to which violent media portrayals of females are beneficial to those who have experienced sexual assault.

However, Hahner and Varda offer a different perspective on violent female portrayals in *It Follows and Rape Culture: Critical Response as Disavowal*, suggesting that the possibility of the “benefits” that Ferreday states audiences receive from speaking out about their experiences as an opportunity to heal and cultivate awareness about sexual assault do not address rape culture in media and are often lost on audiences overall (Hahner & Varda, 2017). In the 2014 independent horror film *It Follows*, the story explicitly references and counters rape culture, which Hahner and Varda examine critical responses to the film. The authors state that though “the film offers ample opportunity for the audience to grapple with the horrors of sexual violence, critical responses suggest that audiences do not overcome the entrenched violence of rape culture.” The authors

agree the film is groundbreaking in its anti-victim blaming representation of sex-positivity, yet their unique feminist analyses of film reviews, using Judith Butler's theories of "recognizability and precarity," revealed that very few viewers of the film understood the movie as an attempt to address rape culture. Through exploring various audience analyses of violent female portrayals from a feminist standpoint, the extent to which views of violent female portrayals have evolved throughout the decades to understand whether these depictions reflect contemporary mainstream feminism can be better understood by examining the spectrum of public reception to how issues surrounding gender equality are received overall.

Authors Minowa, Maclaran, and Stevens in *Visual Representations of Violent Women* explore depictions of female violence, such as those portrayed in the Quentin Tarantino films *Kill Bill 1 and 2*, proposing that the female portrayals provoke a range of gender issues in contemporary consumer culture (Minowa, Maclaran, & Stevens, 2014). The authors' approach media portrayals of women through history and compare contemporary media texts from an art historical framework, illuminating the evolving role of violent female rhetoric in desensitizing audiences to presentations of women engaging in violent acts and behavior. Minowa, Maclaran, and Stevens contend that though these depictions create empowering images of women, these images of violent women potentially reflect a sort of artificial mimicry of masculinity that elicit transformations of agency which only further perpetuate the rhetoric of violence overall. Understanding the complex ideological impact violent female rhetoric has on gendered conceptions of agency demonstrate how limits on women's agency persist in categorizing

women into stereotypical roles that do not legitimize the lived realities of women to break conventional female molds mainstream media texts perpetuate.

In the literature review of problematic definitions of gendered violence and the rhetoric of feminism, women, and violence, these sections provide potential sites of examination to understand the roles that likelihood and reliability of the victim narrative play in constructing empathy for the victims of sexual violence in rape-revenge films. The exploration of feminist analyses on violent female rhetoric provide insight into audience reception of marginalized narratives surrounding gendered politics, suggesting power dynamics play a role in shaping dichotomized viewpoints of gender norms, audience reactions of sexual assault, how the cultivation of rape culture might be deconstructed through discourse in online social media forums, ways in which subversive tactics that address gendered violence may be lost on audiences overall, and themes of mimicked masculinity that undergird media portrayals even though these representations may initially seem to address gendered issues through the lens of intersectionality. Given the literature review on the rhetoric of feminism, women, and violence, it is valuable to explore the rhetoric of female violence through the lens of intersectionality that principles of standpoint feminism illustrate to understand the impact of problematic definitions of gendered violence on potential representations of mainstream feminism in contemporary media texts.

#### *Rationale for the Current Study*

A great deal of scholarly attention focuses on portrayals of women in contemporary film with several examinations that explore how feminism has been represented in media portrayals. However, an in-depth exploration of scholarly texts

reveals that scant literature exists on explorations of how the violent female rhetoric of the “rape and revenge” genre of films impacts public reception to principles of contemporary, mainstream feminism. Though violent female portrayals of the rape-revenge genre of filmmaking throughout time initially seem to endorse female empowerment, an investigation of these gendered depictions of violence presents an opportunity to illuminate marginalized perspectives on the rape and revenge trope of media storytelling. As a result, this study focuses specifically on rape and revenge films. Very little discourse and research exist that illuminate public responses to the notions of female empowerment attempted to be conveyed using violent female protagonists in rape and revenge films. As such, the application of narrative criticism from the lens of standpoint feminism to the study of violent female rhetoric is significant in understanding the epistemology and socialization of contemporary rhetoric on feminism, women, and violence. Therefore, focusing on media portrayals of women engaging in violent acts and behavior in rape and revenge films from the past five decades represents a significant theme that has yet to be examined regarding public views surrounding contemporary, mainstream feminism. To do so, it is first essential to describe a historical representation of violent female portrayals in media depictions of the rape and revenge genre of filmmaking. Featuring female protagonists, these films represent violent female accounts that provide the opportunity for a narrative analysis to be employed from the lens of standpoint feminism. In *Rape, Revenge and How We Watch*, Hess stresses in her analysis that “Stories that hinge on avenging rape with killing risk sidestepping the complicated dynamics of recovery in favor of the easy resolution of the victim achieving simple physical dominance over her attacker” and posits that “at their (rape-revenge films) best,

the violence works largely as metaphor, luring audiences in to more complex and intriguing examinations of rape's psychological consequences” (Hess, Rape, Revenge And How We Watch, 2017). The focus of this analysis, as with Hess’s, studies violent female representations in rape-revenge films over time, and how, if at all, these portrayals bear on contextual factors of contemporary mainstream feminism, which comprise of objective ideologies of kyriarchy, to engender misused tenets of feminism. The following research question has been proposed given the review of literature on media representations of intersectional feminism, problematic definitions of gendered violence, and violent female rhetoric:

*Research Question: To what extent, if any, do probability and fidelity function in rape-revenge cinema to create empathy for the victims of sexual violence?*

### CHAPTER THREE:

#### METHODOLOGY AND DESCRIPTION OF ARTIFACTS

The research method for this study employs narrative analysis through the lens of standpoint feminism. Directed by the conceptual frameworks of both narrative analysis and methodologies used in standpoint feminism, the narrative paradigm seeks to identify themes of motivation in the narratives chosen for this analysis and then to analyze the probability and fidelity of narrative concepts formulated. Additionally, standpoint feminism seeks to address the epistemological implications of character motivations that the theoretical framework of narrative criticism reveals in media texts and then identify and analyze marginalized standpoints of understanding through the lens of intersectionality. In this chapter, the first section provides a summary of narrative analysis. The second section explains the analysis method of standpoint feminist theory. The third section provides an overview of the process used to select the rhetorical artifacts this analysis engendered. The fourth and concluding section of this chapter then briefly summarizes the films chosen for this analysis.

#### *Narrative Analysis*

Employing narrative criticism involves placing emphasis on stories we tell ourselves and others to make sense of the everyday life experiences encountered (Rodden, 2008). Developed by Communication Studies scholar, Walter Fisher, the narrative paradigm was introduced to understand how communication is constructed, and how the approach of storytelling informs the nature of rhetoric (Fisher, *Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument*, 1984). Narrative theory allows for the opportunity to examine the stories we tell one another and then

investigate how the meanings we make from these accounts are constructed. The fundamental nature of narrative is an essential component to the cultivation of communication, which assists in building human foundations of life experiences to engage others and establish mutual understandings of community-built knowledge (Miller, 2005). Narratives can be seen in the words formulated to communicate, or actions engaged in, and represent meaning dependent upon those who elect to enact, create, or interpret them.

Various categories exist for the study of narrative criticism. Some include an analysis of the type of storytelling used, such as fiction or non-fiction, as well as prose or poetry. Another consideration is genre, in which myth, history, and legends can be examined. The category of structure allows components such as plot, theme, irony, and foreshadowing to be conceptualized. Other classifications involve characterization and communicator's perspective. Features important to consider when critiquing from a narrative perspective should focus on storytelling structures that elicit meaning from the artifact being studied, such as setting, characters, narrator, events, temporal and causal relations, audience, and theme. Once motivational themes have been identified, probability and fidelity are analyzed using structural coherence and the reliability of realities expressed through the stories told. Structural coherence is evaluated through the examination of consistency used to adhere to the development of the story. Narrative substance is also analyzed to assess the characterological elements presented. Finally, narrative fidelity is used to determine how well the narrative reflects a realistic portrayal of the central characters in the stories. Through the investigation of artifacts using the narrative paradigm, the goal is to understand to what extent the narrative is effective in



influencing the lives of the audience. Due to the deconstructive limitations that employing traditional narrative criticism imposes, which do not take socioeconomic and political factors into consideration, this narrative analysis is employed using feminist standpoint theory to address such limitations.

### *The Lens of Standpoint Feminism*

To effectively analyze the violent female portrayals in the rape-revenge genre of cinematography, a narrative perspective that examines viewpoints from a feminist standpoint is essential to address the subjective nature of the term violence from the perspective of intersectionality, which seeks to deconstruct meanings and understand the epistemological implications in the objectives of narratives (Narayan, 1989). Developed by feminist theorists Sandra Harding and Nancy Hartsock, standpoint feminism serves to identify facets of communication that embody philosophical confrontations of social injustice and inequality (Harding & Hintikka, 2004). Standpoint feminist theorists regularly engage in dialogue regarding the controlling of language to perpetuate power imbalances, the role of mass media in desensitizing authoritarianism, and the unconditional tendency to depend on empirical research and as well as the overall willingness of society to approve of scientific data. Standpoint feminism asserts that one of the best ways to discover how the world works is to start the examination from the standpoint of women and other groups on the margins of society. Harding states that “when people speak from the opposite sides of power relations, the perspective from the lives of the less powerful can provide a more objective view than the perspective from the lives of the more powerful” (Steiner, 2014). It is suggested that the inequalities which occur, such as intersectional issues of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation,

allow for the opportunity to analyze how various places in social hierarchies have the tendency to generate a variety of encounters within social settings and environments.

Due to the nature of the narratives portrayed in the five films selected for this proposed research study, which revolve around a three-act structure that rape-revenge films traditionally adhere to, these stories expose audiences to continual depictions of gendered violence. For this analysis, the criterion generated for selection of the films to be examined include female protagonists, and, according to the three-act structure of rape-revenge films, must comprise of a character being violently raped and possibly further abused, tortured or left for dead, the character or character's loved ones depicted as surviving and/or rehabilitating themselves, and the character or character's loved ones exacting revenge upon and/or killing their rapist(s). Violent portrayals involving females often stand out as some of the most talked about amongst audiences regarding on-screen depictions from the past five decades of the rape-revenge genre of films, from the notorious half hour rape scene portrayed in *I Spit on Your Grave*, to graphically detailed scenarios of torture and murder that are plotted in the *Kill Bill* film franchise to exact revenge in premeditated response to such violently committed acts. Other more insidious forms of violence take precedence throughout the films, as females are depicted enduring painful sequences of torture with composure, subjected to humiliation, and involved in committing and/or being victimized by emotional, psychological, and verbal acts of manipulation and betrayal. Whether it is the infliction of violence upon females, females engaging in violent acts, and/or depictions of more latent violence as described above, it is important to analyze these significant forms of violence and the extent to which probability and fidelity function in these five films to create empathy for the victims of

sexual violence. It is these violent female portrayals involving the above described scenarios of violence that are analyzed using narrative criticism from the perspective of feminist standpoint theory.

#### *Artifact Selection Process*

Constructed from four criteria, five films were selected from their respective decades based on the film genre of rape-revenge cinema. First, for this study, it is important to analyze films from the last five decades since the rape-revenge genre of filmmaking has only relatively recently emerged as a subcategory of exploitation films popular during the 1970's. As such, each of the films fulfills this criterion by selecting each film from their respective decade of the last fifty years. Second, the focus of this study is on violent portrayals of females in film. Consequently, each of the films considers the starring role of females engaging in violence as a central part of its plot. Third, investigating the rhetoric of rape-revenge film is an underexplored area of scholarly research. For this study, the films meet the third criterion of falling into the subgenre of rape-revenge cinema. Finally, identifying films that are relatively well known by mainstream audiences present the opportunity to understand what is conventionally circulated overall in the public sphere of rhetoric. The films selected for this analysis meet the final criterion of qualifying as films mainstream audiences are generally familiar with based on their respective film genre, while still being classified as a subgenre within the sexploitation cinema categorization of filmmaking.

Once the four criteria were established, films that fell under the rape-revenge categorization of filmmaking were investigated. After compiling each film from their respective decade of the last fifty years, this compilation was further distinguished by

applying the remaining criterion of being considered well known by mainstream audiences given their respective genre and starring female protagonists as the major roles for the films. The following five films fit the selected constraints: *Day of the Woman* (a.k.a.) *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), *Red Sonja* (1985), *Eye for an Eye* (1996), *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003), and *Elle* (2016). These films each represent violent female portrayals throughout the relatively brief history of the rape-revenge subgenre of cinematography, are considered well known by mainstream audiences within their respective film genre, star female protagonists, and therefore provide opportunity to analyze the extent to which probability and fidelity function in these five films to create empathy for the victims of sexual violence.

#### *The Films: Summaries of the Rhetorical Situation*

*Day of the Woman* (a.k.a.) *I Spit on Your Grave* is a film released in 1978, and was written, co-produced, directed, and edited by American-Israeli film writer Meir Zarchi. This American rape-and-revenge exploitation horror film tells the story of Jennifer Hills (Camille Keaton), a Manhattan writer whose summer vacation at a secluded cabin goes terribly wrong when a group of four men gang rapes her and leaves her for dead. Thereafter, Hills plots killing each of her perpetrators in the worst possible ways as retribution. The film had a limited release, which later expanded to a wider release in 1980. *Day of the Woman* (a.k.a.) *I Spit on Your Grave* is noted for its controversial depiction of graphic violence, nudity, obscene language, and lengthy depictions of gang rape, one of which takes up 30 minutes of the film's runtime. Film critic Roger Ebert became one of the most notable detractors of the film; giving it a "thumbs down" and calling it "a vile bag of garbage" (Ebert, 1980). The film remains

controversial to this day, as both Ebert and ultimately Siskel deem it one of the worst films ever made. On the other hand, the film has also been revered as a cult classic over time, which made *Time* magazine's "Top 10 Ridiculously Violent Movies."

In 1985, the Dutch-American sword and sorcery action film, *Red Sonja*, directed by Richard Fleischer, features *Marvel Comics*' character Red Sonja, who first appeared in the comic book's *Conan the Barbarian* series. In the film version of the story, Sonja is raped by soldiers of Queen Gedren, a tyrant who has Sonja's family slain as a result of refusing queen's sexual advances. As she vows vengeance upon the queen, her cry for revenge is answered by the red goddess Scáthach, who grants Sonja heightened powers of strength, stamina, agility and fighting skills. However, Sonja is bound by the concession that she must never "lie with a man" unless he overthrows her in battle. A character referred to as 'The Grand Master' encounters Sonja and later trains her in swordsmanship, where a bond is formed in which he becomes the only man Red Sonja builds trust in. Meanwhile, a relic known as the Talisman, fabled to have created the world and all living things, is discovered to exist in a nearby temple, which legend states can only be used and touched by women. The temple's High-Priestess instructs the artifact to be banished to the depths of the temple due to its powers of male vaporization, but the queen which Sonja has sought vengeance upon commands her soldiers to usurp the Talisman. Sonja is urged to reclaim the Talisman and destroy it, being told it has the capacity to destroy the world. Sonja once again encounters Queen Gedren, engaging her in final combat and killing her by throwing her into lava, where Sonja also throws the Talisman in after her, decimating the fortress they are occupying. Sonja and her companions evade death through their narrow escape of the citadel. The film ends when Sonja is shown engaging

in an ultimate battle with Kalidor (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger), one of her cohorts in the quest. Sonja and Kalidor engage in a battle which Sonja is defeated in and they then kiss in fulfillment of the vision the red goddess Scáthach prophesies of Sonja never lying with a man unless he overthrows her in battle.

*Eye for an Eye* is a 1996 American psychological thriller directed by John Schlesinger and written by Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver. Adapted from Erika Holzer's novel of the same name, the film portrays mother Karen McCann, played by actress Sally Fields, listening helplessly on the phone while her daughter Julie is violently raped and murdered. Working to overcome the trauma of losing her daughter, McCann is encouraged to seek counseling. It is through this pursuit of emotional support and recovery that she meets people in similar circumstances, where she experiences further turmoil after realizing the failure of the court system that has allowed the perpetrator of her daughter's rape and murder to go free due to technicalities surrounding DNA evidence of the crime. McCann ultimately takes matters into her own hands and decides to avenge the crimes committed against her daughter by plotting to kill the murderer. McCann's plan involves luring the murderer into her home, intending to use the guise of self-defense to protect her from being charged with homicide. Her plan ultimately succeeds as she shoots the assailant dead and calls the police. At the end of the film her husband is shown supporting her actions, even though he knows the truth of what McCann has done.

*Kill Bill: Volume 1* is a 2003 American martial arts film written and directed by Quentin Tarantino. It stars Uma Thurman as "the Bride", who seeks retribution for the attempted murder of her and her unborn child. The film tells the story in a nonlinear

method of time progression, where it begins with “the Bride” awakening from a four-year coma to discover she is no longer with child. She kills a hospital worker who has been raping her while she was comatose, seizes his truck, and teaches herself to walk again. Resolving to kill her ex-lover Bill and all four of the henchman responsible for her suffering, “the Bride” chooses O-Ren Ishii as her first victim, who is the leader of the Tokyo yakuza. As “the Bride” trails after Bill and the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, she is led to Japan, where she proceeds to massacre countless members of Tokyo’s transnational organized crime syndicates to confront O-Ren in a final showdown as the first person on her hit list in the pursuit of her goal, which is to kill her ex-lover, Bill.

*Elle* (French for "she" or "her") is a 2016 psychological thriller film directed by Paul Verhoeven and written by David Birke, based on the novel *Oh...* by Philippe Djian. The film stars Isabelle Huppert as Michèle Leblanc, the head of a video game company, who is raped in her home by a masked assailant and decides not to report it due to her prior encounters with the law. Michèle is raped again numerous times by the same masked assailant and is depicted calmly cleaning up the mess left behind from the traumatic events, appearing placid throughout the film as she resumes her life. Eventually Michèle is attacked in her home and raped, which results in her stabbing the rapist’s hand and unmasking him, learning that he is Patrick, her neighbor, who she had developed a prior flirtatious relationship with despite the fact he is married. She learns that he can enter her home and at this point it is not revealed why Michele does not call the police or take measures to further protect herself within her home. Later, Michèle gets into a car crash in a secluded area, but instead of calling an ambulance she decides to call Patrick after numerous failed attempts to reach any of her friends, who are unavailable to assist

her. Patrick locates her, removes her from the car, nurses her wounds, and develops a controversial roleplay bond with her that involves Patrick raping Michèle again which the film uses as an attempt to blur the line between rape and consent. In a final sexual encounter, Michèle's adult son Vincent, who has been oblivious to the blurred S and M sort of dynamic between his mother and the rapist, walks in on the two and sneaks up behind Patrick, bashing his head in and ultimately killing him. At the end of the film, Patrick's wife surprisingly thanks Michèle for satisfying Patrick's sexual needs, suggesting that she understood to some degree that the two were engaged in a compromising sexual relationship.

This chapter provides a description of the narrative paradigm and standpoint feminist theory, explaining how these two methodologies are applied to the five films chosen for this analysis. Each of the films' rhetorical situations were briefly overviewed which engendered the exigency for discourse surrounding mediated violent female portrayals of the rape-revenge genre of filmmaking produced from the past five decades. As such, the following chapter provides findings and analysis of each of the five chosen films for this research study using the narrative paradigm from the perspective of standpoint feminism to understand the extent to which probability and fidelity function in these five films to create empathy for the victims of sexual violence.



## CHAPTER FOUR:

### FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

#### *Findings*

As examined in the literature review, the narrative of violent female rhetoric presents artifacts that potentially communicate cultural discourse surrounding contemporary mainstream feminism. Given the wide range of critical reception to violent female rhetoric historically, employing narrative criticism from the lens of standpoint feminism is valuable in illuminating the epistemological manifestation of the term vengeance in correlation to the characters' motives identified in the films selected for this analysis, as it "offers a way of interpreting and assessing human communication that leads to critique, a determination of whether or not a given instance of discourse provides a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world" (Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*, 1987). As such, the probability of the narrative paradigm is used to analyze the coherence of the motivations communicated in each film, then the fidelity of the narrative paradigm is employed to interpret the reliability of the beliefs and values depicted for each character.

In order to explore the research question proposed in this study, concepts of feminist rhetorical theory is applied to engage in discourse about the rhetoric of female violence from a standpoint that is not only intended to provide insight into motives, beliefs, and values of stories told about historical depictions of female violence in media, but also to offer an alternative viewpoint to the rhetorical construction of feminist viewpoints in the current culture of gender equality. To do so, epistemologies of

vengeance are analyzed which have been constructed according to pivotal scenes in which female portrayals of violence are depicted in each of the films. The three key themes that have been identified as probable motivations to be explored in the subtext of each given film seek to illuminate constructions of vengeance regarding violent female portrayals, which include pivotal scenes where women are portrayed as victims, pivotal scenes where women are portrayed victors, and perceptions of female empowerment formulated in response to these narratives of violence. In *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, professor of Film Studies Carol J. Clover illuminates the important juxtaposition of portraying women as both victims and victors in this exploitative genre of film to identify reasons, warrants, and values being expressed in their narratives as both prey and villain (Clover, 2015). The following findings section is arranged to first introduce the three themes and then to explore the motivational narratives of each of the five films chosen through the given themes introduced.

In employing the first step of the narrative paradigm analysis, the probability of vengeance was applied to first identify primary motivations victim, victor, and empowerment expressed in the films selected for this analysis due to the nature of revenge that is fabricated within each narrative. Narrative probability is then used to further analyze the victim and victor narratives of each character in these films as a way to identify the structural coherence of character motivations in their interactions with other characters. Next, narrative fidelity is applied to the victim and victor narratives in order to analyze how beliefs and values are cultivated through the use of narrative material in the various motivations of vengeance that have been identified through narrative probability. Finally, the additional analysis of standpoint feminism is applied to

the perceptions of female empowerment overall conveyed in each film, as exploring the epistemology of vengeance is critical in locating the origins, perspectives, and implications of rhetorically constructing vengeance through depictions of female empowerment in rape-revenge films.

### *Women Portrayed as Victims*

Vengeance is described as punishment in response to injury or offense, or the act of retribution. When this term is further deconstructed, however, the meaning illuminates that injury and offense are key in understanding why retaliation is occurring in the first place. Investigating how the violent narratives of women are portrayed in these films provides the opportunity to consider to what extent the differences in the meaning of the term victim makes the issue of violence problematic. Considering the meanings made when the term vengeance is deconstructed, examining what violence (which can be attributed to deconstruction of the terms “injury” and “offense”) is often in response to is crucial for understanding what roles women have played in aggressive acts and violence overall. Additionally, when standpoints of class, culture, religion, race, and disability come into consideration, these gendered perceptions often differ. As complexities of these intersectional differences are considered, the various definitions, purposes, and responses to violence are significant in understanding the epistemology of the term.

Feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan’s addresses how women have been constructed socially to cultivate female expressions of aggression and violence according to her ethic of care theory. Behavioral responses such as verbal aggression, talking negatively about others, gossip, passive aggressiveness, manipulation, self-harm, suicidal attempts and engaging in the act of suicide act as potential victim motives in applying the

probability of the narrative paradigm, as they serve as mechanisms through which those who do not have the permission or power to behave violently may engage in as alternative ways of behaving to express more “socially acceptable” female forms of violence, and therefore engender exigencies of agency that demonstrate varying perceptions of female empowerment.

*I Spit on Your Grave*

The motive of vengeance is constructed for Jennifer in *I Spit on Your Grave* as she is portrayed having violence inflicted upon her all throughout the notorious, hour-long rape scenes that occur in the film. As each of the four assailants take their turn in emotionally, verbally, physically, and sexually assaulting her, the probability for vengeance becomes increasingly stronger as Jennifer is depicted enduring multiple forms of rape in her encounters with the assailants. As her bikini is ripped off, Johnny, the first aggressor, rapes her vaginally. Though she at first screams and struggles to fight back, her body begins to go limp as she is shown disassociating from the act of being raped by Johnny and lays naked and filthy in the grass, mimicking the lifelessness of a rag doll as Johnny finishes brutally raping her. She is then dragged bodily to a large boulder where her body is placed in a position of prostration and the second assailant, Andy, anally rapes her in a most humiliating and painful manner.

The act with Andy invokes perhaps the strongest impetus for vengeance as the camera focuses on his facial and bodily motions, which are especially alarming for viewers in the audience due to the expressions of cruel joy and sense of rhythmic dance with which he employs his painfully vigorous thrusts. This significantly explicit scene ignites a scathing desire for her to enact revenge on these assailants. It then sets the stage

for reliability of the vengeance narrative that is constructed. Probability of the victim narrative is greatly increased here which alerts viewers to the anticipated act of vengeance that may nowhere near compensate for the extremely graphic depictions of violence against Jennifer in her narrative as victim.

The assault unfortunately does not stop here, as it continues once Jennifer crawls back to her cabin after awakening from the throes of unconsciousness induced during the previously described scene of rape by Andy. Now inebriated with alcohol, Matthew is coaxed by Johnny to join his peers in participating in the gang rape of Jennifer, where she is depicted once again being held down as Matthew forces himself upon her. This is made all the more humiliating as Matthew claims he cannot orgasm and further prolongs the torture and agony Jennifer has thus endured. Any shred of trust and dignity that might have been redeemed as a result of the character Matthew embodied now obliterated, this scene compounds Jennifer's narrative motivations for vengeance threefold, leaving audience members who have managed to remain viewing the film at this point with no choice but to remain for the promise of satiating the appetite for any garden variety vigilante.

The fourth and final act of rape is committed by Stanley, where he is shown sitting on top of Jennifer, verbally and physically assaulting her and thrusting his groin in and out of her face, which leaves viewers with the ambiguous notion that this final rapist has forced his genitalia into Jennifer's mouth to simulate oral rape. While this is occurring, the other rapists discover the manuscript Jennifer had been working on during her excursion, reading aloud the words she had spent her time authoring, mocking her art. They then proceed to rip the pages of her work into shreds, and Jennifer again falls

unconscious from the trauma she has so far endured. The four men leave her bloodied and filthy from mud caked stains accumulated when she had attempted to crawl to what she thought was initially the safety of her cabin. They retreat to a diner where it is unanimously decided that Matthew should return to stab and officially murder Jennifer to avoid any future consequences for their misdeeds. Matthew reluctantly agrees, but after returning to the scene of the crime ultimately decides he cannot commit murder and instead covers the knife intended to kill with Jennifer's blood and leaves in a frenzied panic, therefore concluding the probability of Jennifer's narrative as victim.

### *Red Sonja*

In the film *Red Sonja*, the probability of the vengeance narrative is not as heavily emphasized in comparison to Jennifer's narrative of vengeance in *I Spit on Your Grave*. A brief introductory scene simply depicts Sonja recounting the scene of rape that engendered her exigency of justice as a faint memory that is recalled in her encounter with the Goddess Scáthach as she is imbued with the heightened powers of sorcery that are granted to her in Sonja's cry for revenge against the injustice of her being raped and her family being murdered. A faint and blurred image, used to indicate that the scene is referring to a past memory, briefly depicts a soldier laying atop Sonja, forcing sexual intercourse upon her, and fades out after less than a minute. The duration of the film revolves heavily around the journey of Sonja's narrative as victor in response to the vengeance that she seeks to enact upon Queen Gedren and the soldiers that raped Sonja and killed her family. At this point the probability of the victim narrative then transcends to build up Sonja's narrative fidelity as victor in her response to the rejection of Gedren's sexual advances. She takes it upon herself to wound and permanently scar the queen's

face in deflecting Gedren's sexual exploits of her. The storytelling takes a crucial turn in creating the structure for conquest, in which the emphasized construction of the victor narrative is further analyzed using narrative fidelity in a later section of this chapter.

*An Eye for an Eye*

Similarly, the probability of Karen McCann's narrative for vengeance is also de-emphasized in comparison to Jennifer's hour-long construction towards revenge. However, the context of McCann's situation differs in that her daughter is being raped, which McCann is powerless to stop since she is forced to endure listening to the act via a telephone call. Initially, what started out as a call placed to check up on her oldest daughter's progress for a birthday party celebration being put together for her youngest daughter instead results in McCann remaining helpless on the phone as her daughter describes an intruder attempting to break in their home. While stopped in rush hour traffic on her way home from work, McCann is shown running frantically up and down the highway, begging others on the road to call 9-1-1 so she can remain on the phone with her terrified daughter. It is at this point that she hears her daughter's assailant break into her house and then rape and kill her daughter.

Here the film employs the use of narrative material for generating the narrative of vengeance as fidelity, rather than probability, is further constructed through the emphasis of loss of youth and innocence, and then emphasized through gendered devices of symbolism from the birthday party, such as pink colored decorations, a pink birthday cake in the shape of a Barbie doll, an ice sculpture in the shape of an angel designed specifically for the birthday party, and balloons. While the film initially depicts McCann listening in helpless terror as her daughter screams for help from the rapists' assault on

her, it isn't until later in the film that McCann returns home to the aftermath to see that the decorations her and her daughter had been putting together to design the party are now destroyed. The broken ice sculpture of an angel, the smeared pink Barbie cake on the table and floor, and disheveled pink party decorations amid the debris serve as symbolic items that contribute to the fidelity of vengeance to occur due to the representation of tainted purity that has been constructed through McCann's narrative viewpoint. The intentional emphasis of these gendered representations serves as implicit but significant vehicles that attempt to influence empathy for the central characters in the film but unfortunately fail to generate likely and reliable outcomes of compassion from audiences.

### *Kill Bill: Volume I*

Both the victim and victor narrative appear to be constructed with equal emphasis in this film, as one is not given greater weight in comparison to the other considering the probability and fidelity accounts for vengeance and justice. The probability of Beatrix Kiddo's motivation for vengeance through the victim narrative is constructed for the *Kill Bill: Volume I* film in a nonlinear time line of storytelling, where the film begins with the gasps of the severely bloodied and beaten up Bride echoing in the background as she is depicted laying on the ground in wedding attire. She is approached by the booted footsteps of her ex-lover, Bill, and is calmly caressed by him as he wipes blood from her face with a cloth napkin that has the name "Bill" printed on it. The sound of a bullet being chambered within a gun is heard as he explains his masochistic tendencies to seek revenge upon what he has assumed was her betrayal of his love. The Bride utters in final desperation that the baby she is carrying belongs to him. The screen fades to the opening



credits as a bullet is heard being fired and the song “Bang, Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)” by Sonny and Cher is played in the background.

Fast forwarding four years in the film’s nonlinear time plot, the Bride’s narrative as victim is again constructed as she is shown laying in a hospital bed, comatose from the bullet that her ex-lover Bill fired in his attempt to murder her. She is suddenly jerked awake, filled with the memory of being shot, and screams in agony at the realization that she now has a metal plate in her head, and is no longer with child. Trained by her prior experiences as an assassin, she feigns her previous comatose state as soon as she hears commotion from the nurse that has been caring for her during her four-year stay at the hospital. Buck enters the room, who is designated as the Bride’s nurse, donned in medical scrub attire, is with another male accompanying him in civilian clothing and proceeds to explain to his friend that “the cost is 75 dollars a fuck.” Nurse Buck then provides the customary “rules” that are laid out for prospective clients of this transaction thus alerting audiences that engaging in the exchange of money for rape of comatose patients at this hospital is a regular occurrence. Buck warns his friend that “this little cunt’s a spitter” and that “her plumbin’ down there don’t work no more so feel free to cum in her all you want.” Buck’s friend agrees to the terms and is left alone in the room to perform the act of rape that has been regularly performed on the Bride by customers that have come long before him. Oblivious to the fact that the Bride is no longer comatose, he climbs on top of her body, and is then met with a surprise attack by her, in which the story takes a crucial turn in transcending from the victim to the victor narrative.

The probability of vengeance for the victim narrative here is constructed by the symbolic representation of helplessness that the actress’s narrative is imbued with. The

narrative probability of vengeance then contributes to traits typical to victim narratives as the Bride's character is portrayed as helpless, comatose and in a hospital bed, which assists in influencing empathy intended to be generated from audiences. By depicting the Bride as being regularly victimized in this most vulnerable state, which she, up until this point, has been powerless to defend herself given her lack of mental and physical consciousness to these encounters of sexual violence, the victim narrative is constructed and succeeds in fabricating the probability for vengeance through the Bride's narrative of helplessness.

### *Elle*

Much like the narrative for constructing vengeance in *I Spit on Your Grave*, greater emphasis is used to create empathy for the narrative of victimhood for the female protagonist in *Elle*. The complexity of Michele Leblanc's status as victim is portrayed in multiple scenes, where the probability of the vengeance narrative is crafted rather uncharacteristically in the film through numerous occasions of sexual harassment at her place of employment, as well as various points within the film that depict Leblanc's encounters with an assailant that repeatedly breaks into her home to physically and sexually abuse her. Before the opening scene of the film however, fidelity employs narrative material to introduce audiences to the sounds of sexual assault against Leblanc, which are heard prior to any imagery that appears onscreen, as moans of agony from her and then moans of ecstasy from the assailant introduce the first act. The image of Leblanc's cat comes into focus as it calmly watches its owner being raped on the dining room floor of the house. The camera then focuses on the masked rapist who is shown laying on top of Leblanc, and at this point he stands, wipes his groin area off with a

washcloth, throws it on the ground next to Leblanc, and exits the dining room through a door that leads outside. Leblanc lays on the ground, physically overcome by the incident and appearing only somewhat disheveled even though she has just been sexually assaulted. Details such as the nipple of her breast being exposed from the force of the rapist are depicted, as well as the reveal of blood stains between Leblanc's legs. Broken dishes are strewn about on the floor beside her and Leblanc proceeds to calmly sweep up the pieces and take a bath. She later orders sushi and resumes life without reporting the rape to anyone or demonstrating any reactions of emotion that indicate she is afraid, in pain, or angry for the act of sexual assault that was committed upon her. It is in this use of constructed fidelity for vengeance, rather than probability, that challenges many viewers accustomed to more conventional constructions of vengeance through the victim narratives that narrative probability typically fabricates in the rape-revenge genre of filmmaking.

Overall, the probability and fidelity of vengeance for the victim narrative is constructed with varying degrees of emphasis in *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Red Sonja*, *Eye for an Eye*, *Kill Bill: Volume I*, and *Elle* by depicting the central characters of each film in fluctuating states of distress as they are each affected by their encounters of sexual assault. Jennifer fights back, screaming and writhing in agony to the extent that she passes out from the trauma of her experiences. McCann screams in terror and anguish while listening to her daughter be brutally raped and murdered. Finally, the Bride, while no initial reaction is portrayed due to her comatose state, also responds with overwhelming emotional resistance once she gains consciousness and realizes the sexual assault she has been put through. However, the brief flashback of Sonja's rape scene in

*Red Sonja* and Leblanc's mild reactions to the trauma depicted in the rape scenes from the film *Elle* indicate that the construction of victim empathy was not emphasized using the same degree of narrative probability and fidelity that scenes of victimhood emphasized in the films *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Eye for an Eye*, and *Kill Bill: Volume I*.

### *The Construction of Victim Empathy*

In analyzing the probability and fidelity of vengeance for the victim narrative of central characters in each of these films, the points of analysis illuminate the implicit ways in which gender functions as a significant tool to generate empathy regarding the various stories told. Stereotypical portrayals of vulnerability and helplessness are crafted for Jennifer's character in *I Spit on Your Grave* as she is shown as being all alone without another male counterpart to aid her in her distress against her multiple assailants. McCann is also depicted frantically running up and down the street in *Eye for an Eye* feeling an overwhelming sense of powerlessness as she desperately calls out to other drivers on the street to call the police, of which all but one refuse to help her. The Bride is shown powerless in her extremely frail coma-induced position that renders her incapable of fending off her foes. *Elle* is depicted indifferent to the various forms of victimization she is exposed to, as though she has no choice but to ignore and endure the suffering these incidences cause. It is these states of weakness, delicacy, and impotence that women are commonly portrayed and prevail in upholding gendered tropes of powerlessness and incapability. Perceptions of weakness are further compounded by tropes of female subordination and are upheld by social constructs such as the purity myth, the cult of virginity, and the cult of youth ideology. These implicit ideals perpetuate the normalization of submissive female behaviors through messages

constructed in pop culture, religion, and other institutions that have social and political influence in the public realm of communication. In promoting messages of female subservience, these social constructs prevail in placing value on women's morality based upon sexual experiences rather than what a woman thinks, feels, works for, or produces in terms of her own worth. Due to the insidious nature of these norms, women's sexual prowess, or lack thereof, serve as symbolic devices to produce values of empathy regarding female victimization and the need to enact vengeance, and ultimately function to influence empathy for central characters in creating probability and fidelity of victor narratives in violent female rhetoric.

### *Women Portrayed as Victors*

Considering that the first and last films chosen for this analysis have the least amount of emphasis placed on the construction of the victor narrative, it is ironic given the film creators' commentary as to why they desired to produce the messages in these films. While one of the earliest and quite possibly most notorious movies of the rape-revenge genre of filmmaking, the victim and victor narrative in the original version of *I Spit on Your Grave* has been noted as one of the most graphic portrayals of female violence given its respective period. The film was banned in countries such as Canada, Australia, and Great Britain, and its release to video was limited due to its controversial nature (Kaminski, 2010). To evaluate the structural coherence of the warrants, motives, and principles constructed for the probability of the victor narrative, the films used for this analysis must consider the core reliability of the vengeance narratives constructed for each character. For Jennifer, the focus on the need for justice outweighed the emphasis of the desired outcome, which in the case of *I Spit on Your Grave*, was to murder each of the

rapists in the most torturous manner that could possibly exist according to film producer Meir Zarchi (Kaminski, 2010). Contradictions exist here in such a way that the consequences for the rapists' acts do not measure up against the transgressions committed. Over a half hour of uninterrupted screen time is given to the detailed scenarios that occur involving the rape of Jennifer, yet the film only dedicates roughly ten minutes to the aftermath of it all, where Jennifer briefly seeks out each of the rapists to kill them individually. Had there been less emphasis on the constructed need for vengeance, there would have been ample time to direct more of the focus around other vital details that were left out of the story, such as what Jennifer did for herself emotionally, mentally, and physically to recover from the sexual trauma aside from formulate plans to exact revenge. Similar issues with structural coherence can be illuminated when considering the lack of construction for Leblanc's victor narrative, as the film *Elle* neglects demonstrating any internal consistency to reveal a sense of victory that compensates for the suffering her character endured throughout the film, aside from the assailant's widowed wife acknowledging that Leblanc and her husband's affair somehow helped their relationship. Leblanc is depicted being repeatedly raped in the film, a total of five times, in addition to the encounters of sexual harassment she experienced at her place of employment and the relational dominance she endured from her father, mother, son, daughter-in-law, ex-husband, and lover. Leblanc's lack of emotional investment to the undesirable circumstances thrust upon her reveal a constructed narrative of victory that is contradictory to the abuse she suffers, where the only sense of female empowerment is demonstrated through a power exchange she engages in to cope with the lack of agency her narrative possesses in relation to the

numerous rapes that take place in the film. Blurred lines of consent during the sexual assaults against Leblanc infer that she is regaining control of the situation by indicating the pleasure she experiences from being raped, and the pleasure she realizes she is robbing her rapist of once he realizes his loss of sexual arousal at the sight of his victim demonstrating desire for his attacks. At the end of the film, in the final act of being raped, Leblanc is even robbed of the final victory against the assailant as her son is the one who intervenes to attack and ultimately kill him.

In the remaining three films, each of the narratives emphasize more attention on the victor narrative, as *Red Sonja*, *Eye for an Eye*, and *Kill Bill: Volume I* reveal greater structural coherence for the warrants, motives, and principles constructed regarding the probability and fidelity of conquest the characters experience. Since the coherence of narratives involve the exploration of its structure, the use of the narrative's material, the portrayal of the central characters, and an examination of what constitutes a coherent story based on these tenets is reviewed. To understand how the fidelity of the narratives reveal greater understanding for the nature of reality experienced for the central characters in each film, consideration of how well the narrative reflects these public views regarding their encounters is also examined.

Narrative probability begins to be immediately constructed for the victor narrative once Sonja is sanctioned by the goddess Scáthach in the film *Red Sonja*. The remainder of the film focuses on Sonja's quest to build strength, knowledge, and endurance in seeking justice for the crimes committed against her. Her journey is comprised of building relational trust with the companions that join her on her quest for revenge and immersing herself in opportunities to train her sword hand through the many battles she

faces up until the final confrontation with Queen Gedren. Throughout the film the structural coherence of Sonja's narrative is supported by the agency her character is portrayed with as her character is depicted saving men from monstrous battles and building mutually respectful relationships with her companions. Even as her sword arm is bested by the one man who can finally defeat her, the probability for Sonja's narrative of victory is further supported since any concerns about the bodied ownership her male counterpart appears to be entitled to are thwarted by the fact that this man has demonstrated loyalty, respect, and kindness to Sonja in their journey together to defeat Queen Gedren.

The fidelity of victory for Beatrix Kiddo's narrative is also more organizationally reliable in the *Kill Bill: Volume I* film through the agency the Bride is demonstrated having possessed in multiple points throughout the movie. After the initial scene of introduction in the *Kill Bill: Volume I* time line, the recovered Bride is shown entering the household of Vernita Green, one of the members of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad that was responsible, along with the Bride's ex-lover Bill, in attempting to kill the Bride in the beginning of the film. Here the audience is introduced to a version of life that the Bride potentially could have had the opportunity to live had her unborn child not been taken from her in the throes of physical assault and attempted murder by one of the very females she is now attempting to seek revenge upon. The use of narrative material is presented through the exterior of the home, which reveals all the staples of a standard family life: a lush garden with a well-groomed lawn, outdoor toys casually strewn out about the yard, and even a green sand box in the shape of a turtle with the lid halfway off, which the film takes care to depict the Bride resentfully surveying. Once inside the home,



the coziness of the living room environment where one would envision a family sitting down together to watch television after a long day is quite literally shattered to pieces as the Bride engages in physical combat with Vernita, throwing her body across the room and slamming it into pictures hung on the wall which crash loudly to the floor, and then hurling Vernita bodily through the glass coffee table centered in the living room which shatters to pieces upon contact. The presentation of narrative material is also revealed as the fight then moves to the kitchen, where typical household items such as an iron skillet are used as weapons by the Bride to fend off the knife Vernita has now secured to defend herself from the Bride's attacks. Once again, the fight resumes in the living room, where the camera is intentionally centered on the living room window's view of the front yard, revealing that Vernita's five-year-old daughter is being dropped off by a school bus, walking calmly up to the front door of her home. The Bride is moved with temporary compassion, where narrative probability is used to construct empathy from audiences for the victor narrative as the film depicts the Bride granting Vernita mercy by concealing her murderous intentions as Vernita's daughter enters the living room. Vernita insists that her daughter go upstairs to watch television as the Bride and Mommy "catch up," to which her daughter hesitantly agrees. The Bride and Vernita switch pace momentarily and engage in conversation about the past as they walk back to the kitchen, as Vernita devises a plan to kill the Bride as she pours a box of Kaboom cereal into a bowl for her daughter to snack on. The Bride catches on to Vernita's tactic, realizing she has hidden a gun inside the cereal box, attempting to send a bullet straight through the box of cereal and into the body of the Bride. She manages to dodge the bullet and throws a dagger directly into Vernita's head, all the while unaware that Vernita's daughter is standing in

the entry way of the kitchen. Here the structural cohesion of the victory narrative remains consistent to the construction of vengeance for the victim narrative that was fabricated for the Bride as she further pursues her victories. The Bride then checks off the first victim on her list of people she intends to seek revenge upon, indicating another opportunity for narrative material to symbolize the culmination of the central character's reclamation of agency.

The fidelity of the victor narrative for Karen McCann in the film *Eye for an Eye* exists in the more nuanced actions McCann engages in throughout the movie. The narrative of victim transcends to victor as McCann engages in knowledge seeking about the injustice of the law regarding the lack of conviction of the criminal in the acts committed against her daughter. She is shown taking the situation into her own hands after discovering additional information from the bereavement group she attends, learning that there indeed may be other options for ensuring that a sense of justice is dealt to the man who raped and murdered her daughter. McCann then attends firearm training, teaching herself skills for the defense and protection of her and her remaining daughter. After purchasing a gun, she slowly gains more confidence in stalking her daughter's assailant, tracking his behavior and learning everything she can about the many misdeeds he continues to engage in as a serial rapist and murderer to take justice into her own hands. The level of agency McCann acquires is depicted through narrative probability during an incidence in a dark and empty parking lot. Her realization of this newly obtained characteristic is acknowledged as she recognizes this newfound ability to defend herself as a woman when a male who she is concerned might be her daughter's assailant encounters her. She is able to successfully fend him off, even though he indeed was not

who she initially suspected. While she experiences a heightened sense of fear from the incident, she is shown smiling victoriously to herself as she walks away from the altercation in feeling capable and in control of the situation. The structural coherence of McCann's vengeance through the victor narrative is crafted in such a way that when she finally experiences the satisfaction of killing her daughter's assailant, the consistency of the victor narrative provides an equilibrium of justice for the offenses endured.

### *Implications for Perceptions of Female Empowerment*

The research to be conducted in this study comprises films that each demonstrate themes of unlikely portrayals which challenge predispositions of female empowerment that are often lost on mainstream audiences overall. The films selected, and audience reception of them, each depict and explore facets of gendered issues through multiple lenses of intersectionality. By employing standpoint feminist theory to these films as an additional layer of analysis, this study reveals the extent to which probability and fidelity influence empathy based on factors of structural coherence the nature of reality for the central characters. Probability focuses on the structural coherence of the narrative in its ability to make sense as a story through internal consistency, sufficient detail, reliable characters, and relative predictability. Fidelity illuminates the degree to which narrative materials that represent beliefs and values are influenced and can be rooted and championed through connections in the story, the possible consequences resulting in observing those values, the uniformity of the narrative values in alignment with audience values, and the extent to which the story's values represent human values. For films that focus on portrayals of female empowerment, overall the extent to which probability and fidelity function in these five films to create empathy for the victims of sexual violence

weighs heavily on nuances often overlooked by mainstream audiences regarding victim and victor narratives. Understanding the differences in subtle depictions of female victimhood and victory are instrumental in disseminating values of vengeance for violent female rhetoric. Due to the varying levels of structural coherence that probability conveys and the nature of reality that narrative materials of fidelity portray for central characters in each film for this analysis, the extent to which probability and fidelity function in these films for the victims of sexual violence depends on the interchangeability of the victim and victor narratives depicted. For the probability of the victim narratives in *I Spit on Your Grave* and *Elle*, structural coherence functions to create empathy to the extent that victimhood is heavily emphasized in these films due to the internal consistency, sufficient detail, characterological reliability, and predictability that these films emphasize regarding their experiences of victimhood. The victim narratives portrayed in films such as *Red Sonja* and *Eye for an Eye* are emphasized to lesser degrees in comparison to *I Spit on Your Grave* and *Elle*, which demonstrate that the internal inconsistency, insufficient detail, unreliable character traits, and unpredictability of the stories failed to create empathy for the victim's narrative in *Red Sonja* and *Eye for an Eye*. When the victor narrative is taken into consideration as to how probability and fidelity function to create empathy for central characters in these films, *I Spit on Your Grave* and *Elle* succeed in their ability to create empathy for the victim narrative, while *Red Sonja* and *Eye for an Eye* succeed in influencing empathy for the victor narrative. However, a balance of emphasis on both the victim and victor narrative in *Kill Bill: Volume I* reveal that probability and fidelity function to successfully balance and create empathy for its central character. Given the structural coherence of probability and the nature of reality that

fidelity analyses in the narrative paradigm, this study demonstrates that while structural coherence of a narrative may be probable, the nature of reality may not prove to be reliable depending on the contextual emphasis of the narrative, which in the case of this analysis, was based on fluctuating levels emphasis placed on narratives of women portrayed as victims and women portrayed as victors. If too much emphasis was put upon the victim narrative and not enough on the victor narrative, while the likelihood that structural coherence was strongly supported for central characters in the films, this did not necessarily mean that the nature of reality was reliable enough to produce a significant level of empathy for the victims of sexual violence in these films. The same can be said of the latter, which took into consideration the victor narrative. If more emphasis was put upon the victor narrative and not the victim narrative, structural coherence and the reliability of the nature of reality for the narratives also suffered. Therefore, if both the victim and victor narratives are equally emphasized, the likelihood that the structural coherence and reliability of the nature of reality increases, which is demonstrated in the commercial successes yielded by overall audience reception to the film *Kill Bill: Volume I* but does not account for the widespread critical acclaim that the film *Elle* garnered. However, the epistemological insights feminist standpoint theory represents illuminate the problematic voids and assumptions created in portrayals of female empowerment and the subjective nature of reality when misused tenets of feminism are conveyed about violent female rhetoric. Understanding subjective viewpoints of intersectionality explain the significance of why misused tenets of feminism in *Kill Bill: Volume I* and *Elle* resonate with mainstream audiences regardless of the extent to which probability and fidelity function to create empathy for the victims

of sexual violence in these films. The following sections discuss what is missing in portrayals of female empowerment, what is assumed about the nature of reality, and what this means for the nature of subjectivity as movie critics Siskel and Ebert's film assessments are compared to deeper analyses of media texts and is significant for understanding the rhetorical impact these surface level appraisals have on mainstream audiences' reception to media texts overall in aiding historical implications of kyriarchy.

### *Analysis*

#### *What is missing in Portrayals of Female Empowerment?*

Nuances in film that demonstrate female empowerment are often lost on audiences due to male defined tropes of justice in traditional rhetoric. Since traditional standards of rhetoric have historically placed values on a kyriarchal system of principality, distinctions of female empowerment such as those illuminated in the films chosen for this analysis, are not acknowledged and esteemed in the ways that portrayals of male empowerment are revered. Narratives of vengeance, victory, and empowerment, if male, White, heterosexual, and able-bodied are generally accepted and praised, whereas marginalized expressions of vengeance, victory, and empowerment are overall unacknowledged, invalidated, and rejected in the public sphere.

#### *What is assumed about the Nature of Reality?*

In evaluating the characterological coherence of the victim and victor narratives constructed for each of these films, understanding whether the attributes and actions are consistent is important in determining if the portrayals throughout the stories are in fact realistic. While each of these films demonstrate varying levels of probability and fidelity regarding victim and victor narratives, audience responses to the understanding of both

contemporary mainstream feminism and female portrayals of empowerment throughout the history of violent female portrayals in media negate rhetorical constructions of marginalized realities by continuing to invalidate and reject subjective realities that express experiences that do not fall within traditional standards of what has come to be established as the norm. Kyriarchal principles of value are the assumed designation for the origin of storytelling, wherein the nature of reality is questioned when intersectional issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, and able-bodied-ness emerge in constructing narratives, all lenses standpoint feminist theory aids in illuminating.

*What Does This Mean for the Nature of Subjectivity?*

While the narrative fidelity of each story may not ring true for every audience member, there is likelihood that characteristics and motivations of the narratives are indicative of lived realities. The narratives of these stories can be effective depending on the standpoint with which the narratives themselves are viewed, thus having the potential to make a difference in the life of any given audience member and create the desire to change behavior and impact lives in either a positive or negative manner. A conjectural understanding of how the progression of contemporary mainstream feminist viewpoints have evolved in juxtaposition to media portrayals of female empowerment over time are critical in considering the efficacy of such narratives. Analyzing contextual factors, such as interviews with film creators and their intentions about the film's messages, the actresses and actors that were featured in the film, critical acclaim each of these films received, and responses to said critiques demonstrate the potential impact of rhetorical constructions on female portrayals of violent empowerment, which audience perceptions contribute to upholding.

In addition to meeting the standards established for the research, these five films represent themes of marginalized narratives in relation to the female characters presented in the central plot lines within each story. As such, matters of intersectionality are examined through the encounters female protagonists' experience both within their roles in the films as well as from the critical reception of their roles by audience members, where gendered themes of classism, objectification, ageism, racism, workplace sexual harassment, and blurred lines of consent are interwoven into the narratives amongst females from each chosen film.

In examining Ebert's "thumbs down" response, he referred to *I Spit on Your Grave* as "a vile bag of garbage...without a shred of artistic distinction." Given the contextual factors of the particular time period this review was formulated, it is important to note the influence of classism that White male privilege had not only on Ebert's reception to the film, but that many other cultural critics had been influenced by in being given access to the public sphere of film commentary at this point in history regarding critical viewpoints of various media texts. An observation of the historical public commentary surrounding rape culture in mass media reveal that these reviews were often one-sided at best, which is indicative of Ebert's comment in his review of the film as he observed a female member of the audience (which he also states being compelled to mention were "one of many people who randomly talked aloud)" and had "feminist solidarity for the movie's heroine." When Ebert wrote, "I wanted to ask if she'd been appalled by the movie's hour of rape scenes," it is significant to also ask Ebert why he did not feel compelled to ask this same audience member why she may have felt empowered with feminist solidarity in the first place. In addition to the male privilege with which



Ebert's scathing review was constructed, micro aggressive racist comments are also evident throughout his review, along with many others who complained about the movie's "poor production quality" as a weakness, stating, "The story of *I Spit on Your Grave* is told with moronic simplicity. These horrible events are shown with an absolute minimum of dialogue, which is so poorly recorded that it often cannot be heard." Critics do not appear to account for the fact that this was the film writer's debut effort at directing, as well as any struggles Zarchi may have experienced in a predominantly White industry as an American Israeli. Accounting for these factors might have focused less on the "poor" quality of the film and instead brought attention to why it took a marginalized individual to initiate onscreen dialogue about restoration of female justice through gendered representations of empowerment.

Interviews with film directors document important conversations which allow for a deeper assessment of intended values they claim to have instilled in audiences for their films, such as commentary from Zarchi, who shares the life changing experience he encountered first hand when he and his friend witnessed a female crawling from some bushes at a park in New York that they had happened to drive by that evening. Fully disturbed by the bloodied and mutilated appearance of the young girl, Zarchi and his friend sought to help her, discovering she had been beaten and raped while taking a shortcut through the park to meet her boyfriend. They elected to aid the girl in getting the help she needed to recover, taking her to the police. The realization of how unjust the system was in relation to this female's encounter with gendered violence inspired the message of female empowerment he intended to generate in *I Spit on Your Grave*, as he states that the police officer refused to take the girl to the hospital without first

questioning her, which at that point was impossible, because the victim's jaw had been broken from the prior assault she had experienced prior. In taking this facet of the film's context into consideration, the question of whether *I Spit on Your Grave* was a misunderstood feminist film becomes a necessary aspect of examination regarding its potential message of female empowerment.

Male assessment of female bodied ownership appears to inherently manifest itself as a theme encountered by both the identity of *Red Sonja* as a character within the film as well as through the experiences the actress Brigitte Nielsen encountered in audiences' critical reception of her portrayal as Sonja. As such, Sonja's sexual agency is objectified as a male conquest in the story, which while initially seems to have endorsed female empowerment as it requires her to be defeated in a battle by her hands, instead results in misusing tenets of mainstream feminism that only reverse the role of violent power exchange through glorification of Sonja's body as an object of sexual subjugation. Similarly, online disclosures document circumstances *Red Sonja* actress Brigitte Nielsen experienced as continual off-screen objectification occurred through public harassment, where she was shamed as being nominated "Worst Actress" and also won "Worst New Star" through American publicist John J. B. Wilson's ceremonial recognition of mock honors known as the Golden Raspberry Awards due to her role in *Red Sonja* (1986 Awards, 2018). Though the film garnered poor reviews from critics, including low ratings from the website *Rotten Tomatoes*, earning a score of 15% based on 27 reviews, the film has become a cult classic amongst fans of the comic book series titled *Conan the Barbarian*, which has generally comprised of a male audience that overlaps into the fan base of fantasy genre. This sub-cultural group has received significant criticism for the

misogynistic values often upheld within the culture. It has been noted that even supporting actor Schwarzenegger has participated in the public shaming of *Red Sonja*, stating that the movie was the worst film he had ever been in, and further ridiculed Nielson's debut by joking that, "Now, when my kids get out of line, they're sent to their room and forced to watch *Red Sonja* ten times. I never have too much trouble with them" (E!news, 2018). It is interesting to note that while Nielsen received nearly universal condemnation for her title role, her male counterpart, played by Schwarzenegger, has not been judged on the merit of his acting in the film to the degree that Nielson's was critiqued. Yet, Schwarzenegger has been notoriously denounced for his acting by media critics in many other films he has been featured in.

Ageism manifests as a gendered theme encountered given the critical reception of the film, *Eye for an Eye*. The movie received negative reviews from critics, which earned an 8% rating on *Rotten Tomatoes*, based on 37 reviews, and was awarded one star out of four on Siskel and Ebert's infamous film rating system. Ebert claimed the movie was "a particularly nasty little example of audience manipulation," which is questionable given the lack of negative criticism he put forth in similar portrayals of vigilante film such as *Death Wish* (Ebert, *Eye for an Eye*, 1996). Awarding the film three stars of the four to be earned, Ebert stated in his 1974 review of *Death Wish* that "The movie has an eerie kind of fascination, even though its message is scary" (Ebert, *Death Wish*, 1974). Elder women playing the role of mothers who depict portrayals of female justice are judged as being exploitative, while much older male narratives of paternal justice are retold again and again to the extent that five films are still not enough to tell the story but prevail in being rebooted as a 2018 remake due to their supposed legendary ability of storytelling.

The themes of racism in *Kill Bill: Volume I* trickle by as mixed metaphor that has not been widely recognized by mainstream audiences enamored with the film. The common trope often inherent in Western films of “whiteness prevailing” serves as an implicit rhetorical device that fans are resistant in deconstructing given its depiction of a Caucasian lead gaining skills from her Asian counterparts and then using these same skills to defeat the very mentor of such practices. Though actress Uma Thurman who played the role of “the Bride” received a Golden Globe Best Actress nomination and was also nominated for a BAFTA Award as Best Actress in a Leading Role, Thurman’s character as a White martial arts expert, traditionally informed by Asian practices and philosophies of combat, is also criticized by media scholars for its cultural appropriation. Interestingly, review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes* rated *Kill Bill: Volume I* with an 85% score based on 224 reviews, giving the film an average of 7.7 out of 10. Ebert rated the film with 4 out of 4 stars, commenting that the film “is not about anything at all except the skill and humor of its making” and stated that it was “kind of brilliant” (Ebert, *Kill Bill, Volume 1*, 2003). However, cultural historian Maud Lavin provided an analysis of “the Bride’s” female portrayal of violence, stating that it reflects viewers unconscious desires to engage in cathartic acts of vengeance and that “the Bride’s” narrative serves as a vehicle of female identification with aggression as well as demonstrating a potential site for further examination of portrayals of violent female rhetoric (Lavin, 2010).

Issues of workplace sexual harassment and blurred lines surrounding consent emerge as significant themes in the film *Elle*. This movie won the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film, Critics' Choice Movie Award for Best Foreign Language Film, and received an approval rating of 91% based on 209 reviews according

to *Rotten Tomatoes*. Praise from critics have commented that the film was “the most empowering ‘Rape Movie’ ever made” and called it a “lighthearted rape-revenge story” (Felperin, 2016). Felperin went on to describe *Elle* as a “film about a woman’s complicated response to being raped” and that it would likely “draw ire from feminists” but that it was “one of the bravest, most honest and inspiring examinations of the subject ever put onscreen.” Jordan Mintzer of *The Hollywood Reporter* called *Elle* “a film that hardly skimps on the sex, violence and sadism, yet ultimately tells a story about how one woman uses them all to set herself free” which is perhaps the most telling of presumptuous comments regarding victims’ experiences of sexual assault, implying that attempting to complacently resume life after such traumatic events is somehow groundbreaking methodology for how to optimally reconcile being violated. In addressing the thematic issues of workplace sexual harassment and blurred lines surrounding consent undergirding the film, to claim that the film was some sort of original response to the everyday lived realities of what most victims encounter in the violations that occur in the workplace as Leblanc regularly experienced in the film only further problematizes rhetoric that attempts to distinguish consent in contexts of sexual violence.

With the efficiency of current technology, access to online records of actress and actor responses to their experiences after working on the scenes of these films aids in exploration of telling information about audience reactions to their roles of female empowerment. Prominent film critics such as Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, as shown in their reviews and commentary of the films chosen for this study, establish and perpetuate mainstream views not only of violent female portrayals of empowerment but also

misused tenets of feminism that have historically impacted the rhetoric of both in a manner that appears to reflect contemporary portrayals of mainstream feminist messages, as well as actress, actor, and film creator responses to such criticisms of the messages they rhetorically construct about media portrayals of female empowerment. Siskel and Ebert have formulated reviews for each of the five films chosen for analysis. Of those films, *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Red Sonja*, *Eye for an Eye*, *Kill Bill: Volume I*, and *Elle* have each received criticisms that do not fall in line with both the structural and material cohesiveness of the victim and victor narratives constructed for these films. The subjective nature Zarchi describes occurring with the female rape victim he encountered prior to the film production of *I Spit on Your Grave* and its lack of circulation in the public sphere of communication serves as one example of disparity amongst audience reception to the film and the narrative's ability to portray a realistic story. The widespread negative critical acclaim for *Red Sonja* generated negative perceptions regarding nuances of female empowerment that are significant in rhetorically constructing messages about the intersectional lens of feminist principles. Mostly judged on the merit of the acting in the film, typical comments focus on blaming the accents of the actress and actor, where traditional standards of rhetoric base values of worthiness on kyriarchal portrayals of normalcy that reflect American expressions of dialogue. The material cohesiveness of the victim and victor narrative crafted in *Eye for an Eye* is equally judged by Siskel and Ebert on traditional merits of superiority, revealing the hypocrisy of their values in comparison to the praise they offer up for *Death Wish*, the 1974 film with nearly the same premise but instead features a male protagonist. The problems with kyriarchal tendencies to glorify superiority is also found in the general

audience approval for *Kill Bill: Volume I*, where more of Siskel and Ebert's pretense is illuminated in their review of the film in comparison to the "nihilistic gore" that they deem *I Spit on Your Grave* to be filled with "nothing more." Yet, the material cohesiveness for victim and victor narratives come full circle in their warrants, reasons, and values as high praises are sang for the "controversial" film *Elle*, which is comprised of messages of female empowerment that express to audiences that the strength of a woman's character is defined by her ability to walk away from being repeatedly raped and convincing herself that she wants to be raped. Therefore, given the analysis of narrative probability and fidelity constructed regarding the messages of female empowerment in violent media portrayals of women from the past five decades using standpoint feminist theory, the rhetorical constructions of female empowerment do in fact reflect contemporary mainstream feminism overall. As film critic Alexandra Heller-Nicholas' states in her book *Rape-Revenge Film: A Critical Study*, the more she viewed rape-revenge films, the more she understood "there was no singular or unified treatment of rape across this category of when surveyed as a whole", and that "if people are confused about what 'sexual violence' means, then these films offer a notable contemporary example of why contradictory and often hypocritical attitudes can co-exist more generally" (Heller-Nicholas, 2011). Taking these factors into consideration through the lens of standpoint feminism, however, provides insight into narratives of violent female portrayals constructed in rape-revenge films from the past five decades to better understand points throughout time where the narratives of these portrayals have perpetuated misused tenets of feminism and the importance of considering these insights with regard to past, present, and future portrayals of female empowerment as well as

consideration of the rhetorical construction of audience responses to these depictions. Given the literature review on media representations of intersectional feminism, problematic definitions of gendered violence, gendered portrayals of violence in media, and their ultimate impact on violent female rhetoric, the research proposed for this study reveals that the five films chosen for analysis construct violent female rhetoric in a way that reflects and perpetuates contemporary mainstream feminist views regarding female empowerment.

### *Deliverance from Male Defined Justice Tropes*

Acknowledging, validating, and accepting distinctions in nuanced expressions of female empowerment is significant in identifying and deconstructing misused tenets of feminism that are rhetorically constructed in violent female media portrayals that intersectional lenses aid in identifying. Mainstream audiences are only privy to a surface level understanding of feminism that perpetuates the sort of oppression consonant with mainstream feminism, in which messages of empowerment appear to initially be liberating yet manage to instead further oppress expression of marginalized viewpoints. The acceptance of gender equality has long been an issue since the conception of binary beliefs about masculinity and femininity in Western culture, and with that, the demarcation of perceptions that fall outside the status quo. Situated within issues of race, class, religion, sexuality, and able-bodied-ness, of gender equality, and of gendered violence, the propensity to rhetorically construct messages that represent notions of justice must be delivered from the kyriarchal tendency to exclude defining notions of reality that do not fit with traditional standards of rhetoric. To deconstruct epistemological principles of imperialist, White, hegemonic capitalistic patriarchy in



definitions of victimhood, victory, empowerment, and justice, accounts of marginalized experiences must be acknowledged and accepted within the public sphere alongside traditional constructs of knowledge. In doing so, deliverance from male defined tropes of justice can be cultivated through acceptance of subjective realities that allow for a holistic understanding of the impact that oppression has in its various forms, from gendered experiences of inequality and violence to more nuanced accounts that often fall through the cracks due to the marginalization of such experiences.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### DISCUSSION

#### *Summary*

In this study, narrative analysis, informed by the perspective of standpoint feminism, was applied to movies featuring female protagonists throughout the past five decades of the “rape and revenge” genre of filmmaking to understand the extent to which probability and fidelity function in these five films to create empathy for the victims of sexual violence. Female portrayals of violence depicted in the films chosen for this analysis reflect victor and victim narratives constructed about female empowerment that potentially resonate with audiences when the probability and fidelity of both the victim and victor narratives are equally emphasized. Portrayals where narrative probability functioned to create empathy for Jennifer in *I Spit on Your Grave*, and Leblanc in *Elle* emphasized victim narratives through the structural coherence provided in these depictions of victimhood that demonstrated isolation and vulnerability. Fidelity functioned as a device that generated audience empathy in these films in its ability to craft the reliability of vengeance due to likelihood of their status as victims, which was further supported in the narrative materials each film employed to reinforce the reality of objectification. Examples of the narrative material used to support the fidelity of the victim narrative include the environment of isolation that was crafted for Jennifer’s victim narrative in *I Spit on Your Grave* and the repeated themes of victimhood Leblanc experienced in nearly all contexts of her life in *Elle*. In the film *Red Sonja*, the lack of emphasis in creating probability for the victim narrative of Sonja resulted in a scene of brief recollection of the rape that occurred to Sonja. The deemphasis of McCann’s

narrative as victim occurs as a result of more emphasis being placed on her role as victor in gaining agency to restore the loss of power and control she experienced in losing her daughter. Fidelity also served as a device that deemphasized the victim narrative by instead focusing on Sonja's journey of agency and the narrative material used to describe this expedition to empowerment such as the friendships forged and the portrayals of salvation she engaged in saving her male counterparts from vicious monster attacks. However, while varying degrees of probability and fidelity serve to generate fluctuating degrees of empathy for these five films, messages of female empowerment constructed through the victor narrative reveal that historically, mainstream audiences fail to resonate with messages that depict subjective realities due to the cultivation of objective viewpoints that kyriarchal systems of superiority perpetuate, which the commercial successes of films *Kill Bill: Volume I* and *Elle* illuminate. Additionally, when examined through the theoretical framework of standpoint feminism, this study demonstrates that problematic views about feminism continue to be perpetuated when nuances about female empowerment fail to be addressed due to the intersectional lack of understanding about gender equality and the assumptions cultivated surrounding male defined tropes of justice.

Understanding the impact of rhetorical constructions of mainstream feminism on nuanced perceptions of female empowerment is emphasized in this analysis, which indicates that violent female portrayals in rape-revenge films overall represent male defined tropes of justice. While traditional standards of rhetoric have been historically embedded with kyriarchal values of assessment, the distinctions of female empowerment are consonant with intersectional feminism when reassessed through the theoretical

constructs of standpoint feminism. Evaluating the probability and fidelity of the victor and victim narratives constructed in each film reveals that historically, audience reception to messages of female empowerment in these films are subject to traditional standards of rhetorical evaluation based on kyriarchal systems of assessment. Using standpoint feminist theory, distinctions such as film creator commentary about the messages intended for audiences, the reasons for those intentions, film critic commentary, as well as actress, actor, and audience responses to said commentary instead reveal that nuances in messages of female empowerment, which are often lost on audiences overall, represent intersectional lenses of understanding gender equality to reflect contextual factors significant in deconstructing kyriarchal systems of oppression. Breaking down imperialist White capitalist patriarchal ideology engenders the necessity to integrate the study and growth of gender equality that reaches beyond the confines of academia, where higher education has routinely been the gatekeeper of distinctive knowledges that reflect intersectional principles of feminist study. If the study of gender, women, and other intersectional lenses of marginalized viewpoints are incorporated into elementary education the way subjects of math, language, and history are emphasized, knowledge of intersectional feminism will no longer have to be a luxury only college students can afford.

### *Limitations*

The organization employed in this research design, while useful in illuminating narrative frameworks of female empowerment through victim and victor narratives using standpoint feminism, was hampered to a degree through the complex process of examining each artifact from not one, but two methodological perspectives. Had a

conjunctural analysis been employed, perhaps understanding the impact of socioeconomic factors inherent in problematic definitions of violence would have been easier to discern, given various social, political, economic, and ideological paradoxes that are at work at any given point of time throughout history. Since the research of this study focused on rape-revenge films from their respective decades within the past fifty years, it would have been valuable to understand the juxtaposition of social, commercial, and political phenomena from each decade alongside the various waves of feminist schools of thought that were and are in development to rhetorically construct evolving cultural values about nuances of female empowerment.

Additionally, a genre analysis of the films chosen for this study would have been helpful in identifying whether the distinctive messages of female empowerment constructed reveal the prospect for the development of new genres within the rape-revenge film category of storytelling given the intersectional lenses that contemporary schools of feminist thought currently attempt to address in rhetorical constructions of gendered media portrayals. Re-categorization of media texts based upon updated concepts of ideological frameworks aids in understanding the social implications of grouping mediated texts into themes and produce unexpected trends in cultural values. Another restriction which produces limitations to this research is in the lack of examination of violent female portrayals that feature film creators who were not White and/or male. With the exception of *Kill Bill: Volume I*, produced by actress Uma Thurman with writer and director, Quentin Tarantino, each of the films chosen for this analysis were created by males, and only *I Spit on Your Grave* was written from the perspective of a male director who was not White. Had the opportunity to analyze

narratives that went beyond the marginalization of gender and race to understand the extent to which probability and fidelity function in these five films to create empathy for the victims of sexual violence., the likelihood would increase in gaining knowledge about nuanced portrayals of female empowerment that are representative of intersectional lenses of understanding.

### *Final Insights*

Narrative criticism is used to assess motives behind stories told in media texts, while standpoint feminism illuminates epistemological implications to cultivate intersectional viewpoints. American journalist Amanda Hess, observes that alternative narratives which challenge traditional, rape-revenge tropes of storytelling have the potential to decenter values of male defined messages of justice and “offer new insights into the dynamics of sexual violence — they take acquaintance rapes seriously, explore rape’s psychological fallout, and raise questions about what exactly draws audiences to rape-revenge stories onscreen” (Hess, *How Movies and TV Address Rape and Revenge*, 2017). In examining the extent to which probability and fidelity influence empathy for the central characters of these five films, this study contributes to the discourse of not only what creates a likely and reliable narrative in telling stories of female victimhood and the quest to regain agency through narrative analysis, but also adds to the dialogue in understanding how kyriarchal views can be disseminated to examine the nuances mainstream audiences often overlook as a result of misused tenets of feminism being publicly conveyed through the analysis standpoint feminist theory. Identification of the insidious nature of kyriarchal systems of power provides the opportunity to subvert and deviate from the privileging of educational values and instead work towards the

prioritization and cultivation of intersectional values of gender studies. This study provides a narrative analysis through standpoint feminism of five films that each consider female portrayals of violence as a central part of its plot. In particular, the analysis of each film represents their respective time frames over the past five decades, falls under the criteria of what constitutes a “rape and revenge” film, have been viewed overall by mainstream audiences as films that are relatively well known, and portrays women as protagonists in the plot lines. Using the theoretical insights of narrative criticism, this study investigates the common themes observed in the films that fit these specific criteria to illuminate violent female portrayals in film and identify the extent to which probability and fidelity function in these five films to create empathy for the victims of sexual violence. Standpoint feminism provides the framework to reveal the broader cultural implications of violent rhetoric in gendered media portrayals of films from the past five decades featuring female protagonists. Over time, cultural discourse about female empowerment constructed in violent rhetoric has evolved, which ultimately impact the ways in which feminism is cultivated from a mainstream perspective, an academic perspective, and in both public and private spheres of communication. The examination of mainstream discourse about perceptions of female empowerment and feminist schools of thought is crucial for determining what messages prevail in upholding misused tenets of feminism and what is being communicated about intersectional values of marginalized viewpoints. Considering the evolution of mediated phenomena and its correlation to movements of gender equality aids in constructing meaningful dialogue to promote values in support of challenging kyriarchal ideologies and their epistemological implications in further oppressing marginalized populations.

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